

H&R

Essentials

Fear to confidence in three easy steps

Some riders spend so long worrying about their horse's welfare that they neglect their own mental health. Now, a new style of coaching is helping to redress the balance and beat fear for good



Martin Murphy has developed a system called **Bouncebackability** which quickly and simply transforms a negative mind-set into a positive, relaxed and confident one. Why not give it a try?



Beat nerves forever



Step 1 Understand your fears

Humans hang on to fear for dear life – but it isn't necessary, and can ruin our riding enjoyment and performance. Know your enemy, so you can deal with it!

Most of us understand that fear exists for a reason – it helps us to survive dangerous situations, right? Wrong! Not all fear helps us survive – after all, many of us get scared watching horror movies, despite knowing full well that we're completely safe. As a species, we rarely understand fear, as it's a complex system. Not only does fear make us afraid, it can also trigger guilt, anxiety or even embarrassment. The overall effect of this emotional assault on our senses can cause us to react badly, focusing on the wrong things or making us avoid a situation altogether.

In a nutshell, in the face of fear we revert to our 'caveman-like' subconscious rather than reacting in a cool, rational manner. Nowhere is this issue more relevant than in the world of horse riding.

All in the mind
If we're flooded with fear, we revert to our irrational, 'caveman-like', subconscious behaviour.

Fear facts
If you're getting back in the saddle after a nasty fall, or participating in a competition, you may well have some fear. Your body will experience a release of chemicals, some of which might be useful as they help to focus the mind and boost your performance. However, if the body is 'flooded' with these chemicals too quickly,

manner is the effect it has on your horse. Horses are incredibly perceptive animals – they can smell your fear and they'll notice your fearful body language, too. They'll probably conclude that you're scared for a reason and will also become frightened as a result.

Building confidence
Any good instructor knows how to reduce the risk of their pupils being flooded with fear. They ensure their 'exposure to fear' is limited to a

gradual progression. Just like muscles in a gym, your confidence can be built up through repetition and training, and this is the traditional method of confidence building. Unfortunately, though, if something goes wrong, then you may be sent right back to square one, particularly if this 'crisis of confidence' isn't dealt with properly.

Following a fall, or even just a big mistake, it is common to feel like you're incapable and begin to attach negative meanings to the situation, such as: "There must be something wrong with me because other people don't seem to be having this problem".

The reality is much different – most people, including professionals, struggle with fear to some extent. They just don't admit it or know how to deal with it, other than by 'feeling the fear and doing it anyway'. As a result, riders

Did you know? According to research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are – the only important thing is that the first and last letters are in the right place. **So we are predicting all the time!**

can start finding excuses not to ride or do a particular activity, due to the trepidation (and often humiliation) that they incorrectly associate with it.

But all these problems and obstacles stem from your own mind and its interpretation of the situation. So if you built these obstacles, then you can break them down, too!

All we can hear is our inner voice shouting: "Oh my God, I'm going to die!"

then the more basic part of our brain takes over, causing us to react less like a rider on a horse and more like a person running for their life!

Clearly, such a response is destructive. More blood flows to your muscles, leaving less flowing to the brain, so the ability to think quickly can become impaired. What's more, some neurotransmitters in the brain may be replaced by neuro-inhibitors which means that our brains shut down and all we can hear is our inner voice shouting: "Oh my God, I'm going to die!".

But perhaps the most damaging aspect of approaching riding in an overly fearful

All in the mind
To conquer our fears, we can train our brains to 'live in the now' – like gazelles!

Gazelle brain/rider brain
A gazelle narrowly avoids being killed by lions. Within seconds of escaping, it's back to normal and is feeding again. Why do we re-live and reflect events to the point it becomes inhibitive? It's because of the Pre-Frontal Cortex in our brain, which stores up experiences so we can re-live them and develop appropriate responses. If a gazelle had this ability, it would spend its whole life as a quivering wreck – a bit like some riders!



Over-reacting!
One unfortunate side-effect of human learning is the development of phobias or post-traumatic stress disorders. We recall and associate negative sentiments with scenarios where they're not justified. Take a fall. It triggers an 'adrenal dump' that stores this memory along with the other external stimuli. When you next go near the place the incident happened, your brain will retrieve the negative memory as a warning. However, riders still want to ride – it's their passion – so they get into a mental conflict. On the one hand, the primitive part of their brain is saying 'avoid at all costs', but the more developed part wants to overcome the fears because it knows how wonderful the experience CAN be.

Step 2

Re-program your brain

Here's how to replace that pesky fear with more positive thoughts



Now you're aware of the processes going on in your head, you can effectively change the programs running in there. One way to do this is with 'Fast Mental Reprogramming' (FMR) Techniques developed specifically for riders with confidence issues.

The FMR process goes through three stages...

- Association
- Disassociation
- Re-association

All in the mind
 Seventy-year-olds can learn as well as seven-year-olds – it's just most of them lose the habit.

Association – what's triggering your fear?

To start with, you need to acknowledge the behaviour and way of thinking that you want to stop/control. Go through the mental process of recognising a trigger for your fear – in this case, it may be thinking about riding around the school or having a jumping lesson.

This alone may give you butterflies in your stomach (caused by the adrenal glands located on top of the kidneys), which in turn triggers an internal discussion where you tell yourself off for being scared, and so on. This internal fear process is then free to increase in intensity right up to the start of the ride or lesson, by which point you'll be imagining the worst and feeling pretty helpless. You may well get to the stage where you simply decide to lunge instead, or cancel the lesson and save yourself any more worry. That's really not necessary (see 'Don't worry', right).

Dissociation – get away from it all

Think how you would like to feel when you're riding



The next stage is to go through a set of mental exercises that helps remove you from being 'associated' with this drama to a more comfortable, 'disassociated' position.

For example, a situation can seem silly – indeed, almost laughable – when you're on the outside looking in. Envisage the experience from a distance and change the sounds, feelings and images associated with the memory. The use of humour is excellent at helping with this process. Add some cartoon music, make everything look cartoon-like and add in some cartoon sound-effects – the chances are that the scary scenario



Don't worry

The important thing to acknowledge at this stage is that everything running up to the event you're scared of has been self-imposed and is self-propagating. You're fearing the outcome of an event that hasn't even taken place yet, and it's all because of the negative memories being flagged up by that pesky pre-historic part of your brain!

Make it better

Memories do not exist, except in our brains, so if we raise our awareness of this, we can change the programs we run. We, in effect, relearn and the faster the better. We are constantly learning – in fact, it's now known that a 70-year-old has the same ability to learn as a seven-year-old, it's just the older person loses the ability through lack of practice.

will seem much less scary and actually much more silly.

This is just one simple, yet effective, method of changing your perception of an event. There are many more available (see 'Practical brain training', over the page).

Re-association – how would you like to feel?

Once you've banished the pointless and destructive negative dwellings, it's time to visualise what you'd like to see, think and feel in its place. The same mechanism that makes a nightmare seem so real, can be turned around to make a good dream feel just as realistic.

Before their pilots go into space, NASA gets them to visualise the entire process from start to finish, many, many times. This is because studies have shown that visualisation has a positive effect on the physiological and mental processes, even to the extent that it can be more effective than actual practice! By mastering this process, you can create new, positive memories, giving you a lovely big source of confidence.

Believe you can regain your confidence



Practical

Brain training

Change your attitude today with these simple psychological techniques



Make your positive image big and bright – and hold on to it!

All in the mind
External events don't cause fear – it's the way our inner dialogue deals with them.

The reprogramming techniques explained on pages 60 and 61 are often very quick and easy to grasp. Why? Our entire interpretation of the world around us is based on our senses – what we see, feel and hear produces an internal dialogue in our heads. Very often, it's not the external events that are causing fear, but rather the way in which your internal dialogue deals with them. Added to which, our subconscious can't tell the difference between fact and fiction – dreams can sometimes seem so real that they leave us with an emotional effect long after we have woken up. Also, our subconscious likes to use metaphors – it's how it makes sense of the vast amount of information around us. We can manipulate our thought process using these powers.

Here are a few examples to try....

Try this!
Picture yourself positive!
Get a mental picture of a negative episode and point to where it is (usually directly in front of you, clear and bright in colour). Push the picture away, drain the colour out of it, make it into a still or maybe change it into a cartoon. Find a way to reduce its emotional impact. Now picture a time when you rode confidently and really enjoyed it. Make this picture bigger, brighter and more colourful. Fill your head with the sounds, sights and smells of that time until you're enveloped by it. Hold on to that picture. Every time the negative picture arrives, push it away and replace with the positive one.



What keeps us safe is being relaxed and focused, so we can use all our skills



Try this!
Push away the fearball!
For most people, negative feelings start in the pit of the stomach, then circulate throughout the body. Pinpoint the bad feeling in your body and notice which way it's moving: is it spinning, or pulsating? Is it going sideways, backwards, up and down? Then assign it a colour of your choice (people often choose red or black, but it may be any colour). Then picture a more confident colour – blue or yellow, say. Move the fear out of your body while it is still moving or spinning, then maybe circulate it in a different direction, before drawing it back inside the body. How much better does that feel?

Move the fearball out of your body, then change it and bring it back

Try this!
Replace your inner critic!
We're often our own worst enemies, criticising ourselves in our own heads. Tune into yours. Who is it? What tone does it have? What words does it say? Then figure out where around you it is. Is it in front, to the side, behind, maybe inside your head? Move it away, maybe over the fence and into the field! It goes quieter the further away it goes. Change the way it speaks – why not replace the inner critic with an inner cheerleader, saying nice, supportive things, the kind of things that your best friend might say to you? Even the choice of words used by the inner voice can be changed, to great effect. Trying swapping the word 'fear' for 'performance tension' prior to



Get a cheerleader into your head!

a competition. They are equally appropriate, but which of the two would you rather have chanting in your head?

Try this!
Control your environment
If, prior to a big competition, a friend or worried parent asks: "Are you scared?", it presupposes that you should be. This one innocuous statement can undo all your hard work to quieten your inner demons. It is far more beneficial for them to ask you: "How could you be even more confident?" Friends and family can heavily influence your attitude, whether they mean to or not.

Try this!
Stop... Pause... Back to S.A.F.E. mode
As a rider, you might have been unconsciously assuming that fear will keep you safe from harm. But that won't actually work unless you give up horse riding. What will keep you safer is being relaxed and focused, so you're able to utilise all your skills. If you take a wrong turn when walking on your own feet, you don't beat yourself up and attach all sorts of negative meanings to what happened. You just go back to the beginning or where you know where you are, and start again. So if you happen to feel nervous when you're about to ride, or even during the ride, stop! Go back to your safe mode, which is...

STATE: Anchored. Imagine a time when you were calm and relaxed, and get back the feelings or emotional state.

AFFIRMATION. Say "calm and confident" to yourself – it will be hard to say: "Oh my God, I am going to die!" Repeat this or any other positive affirmation, loudly if necessary, because it will prime your body to flow into that state.

All in the mind
Positive affirmations like 'calm and confident' prime your body into calm confidence!

FOCUS. Create a picture in your mind of what you want to achieve, not what you don't want to happen.

EXHALE. It will relax your body and, therefore, your mind. We breathe from the top of our lungs when anxious, deeply when we are relaxed. Push all the air out of your lungs

Step 3

Make a confidence plan

Now you know some of the Rider Bouncebackability techniques, it's time to make a plan – and stick to it!

Once you have started on the road to confidence, remember that it is easy to slip back into old habits. It's like walking through a wood. You have been using a well-trodden path, but by choosing to be more confident, you have to try a new one. At first it's OK, you're enthusiastic, but you may get

snagged up on a couple of brambles (eg, something knocks your confidence) and you turn around and go back to the familiar. New habits take time and practice, but just because your confidence might 'slip' for a moment, it doesn't mean you were on the wrong path.

My confidence plan

- 1 What's triggering my fear? Falling in the school – but I haven't gone near it for six weeks!
- 2 Change the fall into a cartoon – it was pretty silly, a simple trip!
- 3 Visualise being positive – tons of times – and riding Blossom in the school really well
- 4 Push away the fearball!
- 5 Return to SAFE if things go wrong – 'calm and confident', breathe out!
- 6 Release my inner cheerleader
- 7 Don't let Mum get us

Confidence Case study

Annette Jones describes herself as "a novice rider for 20 years!" She told Martin of Bouncebackability that she hadn't ridden for three years, after a bad fall which broke her wrist. Her fear was so bad that she suffered feelings of nausea just at the idea of having coaching.

Annette looks after her three horses seven days a week, but she never rides them. When asked what she'd love to achieve, she replied: "Being able to mount my part-bred Welsh Cob, Jess, without feeling sick would be amazing!" . . . "To ride out of the gates would be incredible, but impossible!"

Martin began by applying the first stage of Bouncebackability – educating Annette about how she does 'fear'. Although she was feeling emotional, he slowly began to undermine her limiting beliefs about herself. Next we applied Fast Mental Programming techniques, which allowed Annette to understand and control her responses, and slow her decision making from automatic fight/flight



All in the mind
If you understand the processes that cause you undue fear, you can tackle and alter them.

to a more measured response. Then she and Jess were brought together in the manège. Annette's hands were shaking, but she was able to

mount. Martin reaffirmed the techniques and she was off! She began to smile broadly and walked the whole length of the manège. Once she realised she wouldn't get her nausea back, she asked for canter and found herself feeling incredibly excited and smiling from ear to ear. Next it was the



seemingly impossible step of riding out of the gates of the riding centre. Annette began to develop some nervousness, but Martin reassured her that she would not be going out of the gates on Jess until she was happy to do so. That would be her decision.

Martin guided Annette towards using the new skills from her own 'Confidence Plan', and with the help of a few more visualisation techniques, she was able to ride Jess out of the gates looking very comfortable and confident.

The next day, Annette phoned to announce that she'd had another incredible day with her horses.



A Bouncebackability course!

Do you suffer from debilitating nerves? Is your confidence at an all-time low? Martin Murphy is kindly offering a Horse&Rider reader a Bouncebackability course worth £150 – the worse you are, the more he'll like it! Write, describing

why you need this course, to Confidence Offer, Horse&Rider, Headley House, Headley Road, Grayshott, Surrey GU26 6TU by 31 August, 2009. For more details on these courses ☎ 07733 121 967 or 0844 8844 988 or visit www.theequestriantherapyteam.com